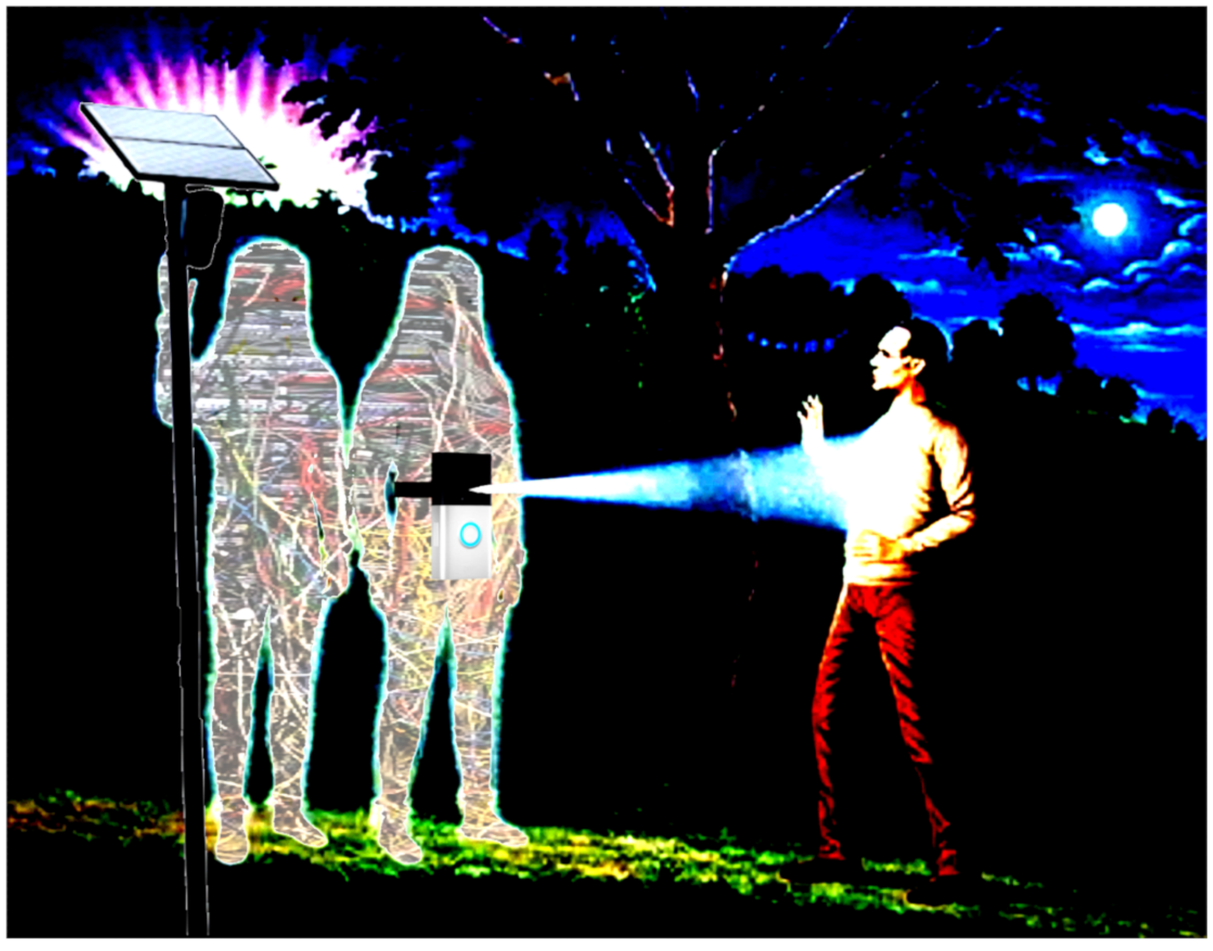
ON THE MYSTICAL BASIS OF THE “NEUTRALITY” OF TECHNOLOGY



AND OTHER TECHNO-CRITICAL WRITINGS FROM THE PAGES OF WILLFUL DISOBEDIENCE BY WOLFI LANDSTREICHER

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

Barbaric Thoughts: On A Revolutionary Critique of Civilization by Wolfi Landstreicher

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Fairy Dust and Toxic Waste by Long Leaf Distro

Technology And Class Struggle by Wolfi Landstreicher

The Totalitarian Nightmare by Enrico Arrigoni

War Against The Information Age: A Future of Mass Social Control by Anonymous

This zine contains essays that were gleaned from the book *Willful Disobedience*, and were published between the years of 1996-2005.

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Technology and the civilized environment (urban, suburban and rural) have only one relationship to the creativity of the individual: that of suppressing it. They force it into extremely narrow and confining channels which only allow for the continuing reproduction of society as an ever more controlling and limiting system. In other words, the present society has declared war on unique individuals and their creativity. Within this context, our creative expression must be largely destructive—tearing down the walls, the dams, the channels that constrain us. Destroying the system of social control, including the monstrous technological system and its urban environment which define the non-lives that most people live, is essential to our self-creation, to making our lives our own.

ON THE MYSTICAL BASIS OF THE "NEUTRALITY" OF TECHNOLOGY

There is an assumption popular among leftists and other radicals who still feel some attachment to the concept of progress or even just to Marxian theoretical constructions that technology, as such, is neutral. The assumption is particularly amusing because those who hold it will accuse the critics of technology of having a mystical and ahistorical conception. What these apologists for technology claim is that the critics of technology promote "technological determinism", making technology the central determining factor in social development, and thus losing sight of the social factors. They end up by proclaiming that the problems do not lie in the technological systems as such but in who manages them and in how they choose to utilize them.

Doubtless, there have been those who have attributed essential determining powers to technology. One of the greatest proponents of this view was Marx, whose economism was decidedly a technological economism. In his perspective, economic necessity created technological developments (such as the early industrial factory) that then created the basis for the inevitable supersession of the dominant economic system. Thus, Marx's economic determinism incorporated a kind of technological determinism as well.

Marx’s fault lies precisely in his determinism (an unavoidable consequence of the fact that his critique of Hegel was limited to turning Hegel—a historical determinist—“right side up” rather than rejecting his fundamental constructs). A truly historical, as opposed to a mystical, approach to social struggle and all the factors involved in it has to reject any form of determinism, because it begins from the idea of history as human activity rather than as an expression of any overarching metaphysical value or conception. Thus, any product of history has to be viewed as a product of its context in terms of the concrete social relationships in which it developed. From such a perspective, there can be no such thing as a “neutral” technology.

Technology always develops within a social context with the explicit aim of reproducing that context. Its form, its purpose and its possibilities are determined by that context, and this is precisely why no technology is neutral. If we understand technology as large-scale systems of techniques (such as industrialism, cybernetics, etc.), then we do not know of any technological system that was not developed within the context of domination, class rule and exploitation. If Marx, in his myopic Hegelian vision, could somehow see communism in the industrial system, it is only because his vision of communism was the negation of individual freedom, the absorption of the individual into the “species being” that was

Technology quite literally controls the activities of people in their daily lives. Any factory worker could tell the precise movements one is expected to make so many times each hour on the production line and how nonconformity to these motions can fuck up production. Computers and other office machines also require very specific, restricted motions of the people they use. And the technological methods of Taylorism are even applied to service work, as ten days of hectic wage slavery at Wendy’s and several years in janitorial and dishwashing jobs taught me. None of this technology decreases labor. It just reinforces the role of the work as a passive cog in the social machine.

Even the recreational use of technology—television, computer games, recorded music and so on— is a form of social control. Without even dealing with the social history of these means of entertainment as products of work, one can easily see their role in controlling the activities of people. Through these machines, millions of people take in the ideas and images fed to them, maybe, in the case of computer games, flicking a button or moving a joy-stick in pseudo-interaction with a passively ingested image. None of these passive consumers of entertainment technology are creating their own pleasures, their own interactions, their own lives. None are a threat to authority.

come as no surprise that historical evidence indicates that it has always only spread by the use of force against the resistance of non-civilized people and that it resorted to genocide when this resistance was too strong. Even in areas where civilization had already been established, there have always been individual resisters—vagabonds treated with distrust by both peasants and city dwellers and often on the receiving end of the violence by which the law is enforce.

But against this resistance, civilization, nonetheless, spreads. In the fields and in the cities, technology developed and, with it, social control.Architecture developed to create the majestic, fear-inspiring temples to authority as well as the nondescript cubicles that house the lower classes. Economic exchange became too complex to go on without the lubricant of money and with this development, the classes of the rich and the poor were established. The impoverished class provided people who could be coerced into laboring for the wealthy. And what is their labor? The further development of the technology that enforces social control. Technology cannot be separated from work, nor is it without reason that each step “forward” in the development of technology has meant an increase in the amount of work necessary for social survival. As Nietzsche said, “Work is the best police”, and technology is this cop’s muscle.

manifested in the compulsory collective productive process of the factory. In fact, the industrial system was developed for one purpose – to maximize the amount of profit that could be gotten from each moment of labor by increasing the level of control over each and every movement of the worker on the job. Each new technological development within the industrial capitalist system simply increased the level of control over the processes to the point where now they are mostly automated and nanotechnology and biotechnology are creating the basis for bringing this control directly into our bodies on a molecular level.

Just as the ideologies of any epoch are the expression of the ruling system of that epoch, so the technologies of any epoch also reflect the ruling systems. The conception that technologies are neutral, that we could simply reappropriate the technological systems and use them for our ends, is a mystical conception granting an ahistorical innocence to technology. Like ideology, those systems of reified ideas through which the ruling order enforces its domination, technology is a product of the ruling order, created to reinforce its rule. The destruction of the ruling order will involve the destruction of its technology, of the system of techniques it developed to enforce its rule.

At this point the technological systems developed by the ruling order are so intrusive and so harmful that to even

pretend that they could be used for any liberatory purpose is absurd. If Marx, following Hegel, wanted history to have a final, determined end, we now know such a view is far too Christian to ever be truly revolutionary. Revolution is a wager, and that wager is precisely that the unknown, which offers the possibility of the end of domination and exploitation, is worth risking, and that taking this risk involves the destruction of the totality of this civilization of domination and exploitation – including its technological systems – that has been all we have ever known. Life is elsewhere. Do we have the courage and the will to find it?

kinship relationships and sexual taboos. Little thought is given in these societies to social control of the surrounding environment.

With the rise of civilization, the nature of social control underwent a qualitative change. It became impersonal and, to a large extent, indirect—controlling and shaping individuals by controlling and shaping the environment in which they exist. While the more direct forms of this impersonal social control are the work of the state, religion, laws and education, all openly authoritarian institutions, indirect social control is the work of such subtle authorities as technology, economy and the urban environment.

Agriculture and the city both create a strict connection to a specific piece of land. Agriculture requires a specific, scheduled and socially organized interaction with this piece of land. The city takes environmental control still further, creating an artificial environment for the social purposes of defense, commerce, religion and government. Its structure enforces conformity to these purposes. The activities of individuals in such an environment are restricted to specific spaces and to specific sorts of motions ad interactions.

The origin of civilization remains a realm of speculation, but its spread is within the realm of recorded history. In light of the restrictions it places on human interactions, it should

TECHNOLOGY: A LIMIT TO CREATIVITY

Technology is a social system. In other words, it is a system of relationships that determines the interactions of human beings with each other and with their environment in such a way as to perpetuate the system. The development of agriculture is often equated with the rise of civilization because it is the first verifiable technological system to develop. Of course it did not develop alone. At the same time, the state, property, religion, economic exchange, cities, laws —an entire network of integrated systems and institutions developed. Taken together, these are what I mean be civilization and the integral relationship between these institutions must be understood if we are to fight authority intelligently.

Within non-civilized societies, the cultural limits placed on creative expression are often very rigid (there is no use in venerating these societies), but they are also very few. There are still vast areas open for unconstrained individual creativity, vast areas for interactions with the surrounding world that are one's own, that are sources of wonder rather than repetition of the same old habitual shit. The limits probably remain so few in these societies, because social control is personal and direct, existing, for example, in

THE MACHINERY OF CONTROL: A CRITICAL LOOK AT TECHNOLOGY

Technology does not develop in a vacuum, independently of the social relationships of the order in which it develops. It is the product of a context, and so inevitably reflects that context. Thus, the claim that technology is neutral has no basis. It could not possibly be any more neutral that the other systems developed to guarantee the reproduction of the current social order—government, commodity exchange, marriage and the family, private property, ... Thus a serious revolutionary analysis necessarily needs to include a critical assessment of technology.

By technology, I do not mean simply tools, machines or even "an assemblage of machinery" as individual entities, but rather and integrated system of techniques, machinery, people and materials designed to reproduce the social relationships that prolong and advance its existence. In order to be clear from the start, I am not saying that technology ***produces*** social relationships, but rather that it is designed to ***reproduce*** them in accordance with the needs of the ruling system.

Before capitalism came to dominate social relationships, tools, techniques and even a number of machines had been created and applied to specific tasks. There were even some systematic applications of techniques and machinery that

could be considered technological in the fullest sense of the word. It is interesting to note that these latter were applied most fully precisely where power required strict order— in monasteries, in the torture chambers of the inquisition, in galleys, in the creation of monuments to power, in the bureaucratic, military and police structures of powerful empires like dynastic China. But they remained largely peripheral to the daily life of the vast majority of people who tended to use tools and techniques that they created themselves as individuals or within their small community.

With the rise of capitalism, the necessity for the large- scale extraction and development of resources led to the bloody and ruthless expropriation of all that had been shared communally by the newly developing capitalist ruling class (a process that was extended internationally through the building of colonial empires) and the development of an increasingly integrated technological system that allowed the maximum efficiency in the use of resources including labor power. The aims of this system were increased efficiency in the extraction and development of resources and increased control over the exploited.

The earliest applications of industrial techniques occurred on board mercantile and naval ships and on the plantation. The latter was in fact a new system of large-scale farming for profit that could develop at the time due to the dispossession

technological system will need to be destroyed in order for us to take back our lives. What this means with regards to specific tools and techniques will be determined in the course of our struggle against the world of domination. But precisely in order to open the way to possibilities for creating what we desire in freedom, the machinery of control will have to be destroyed.

order to accept these risks, hoping that they will be able to fix the weak links quickly enough.

So technology as we know it, this industrial system of integrated techniques, machinery, people and resources, is not neutral. It is a specific tool, created in the interests of the ruling class, that was never intended to serve to meet our needs and desires, but rather to maintain and extend the control of the ruling order. Most anarchists recognize that the state, private property, the commodity system, the patriarchal family and organized religion are inherently dominating institutions and systems that need to be destroyed if we are to create a world in which we are all free to determine our lives as we see fit. Thus, it is strange that the same understanding is not applied to the industrial technological system. Even in this age when factories provide no space for any sort of individual initiative, when communications are dominated by huge systems and networks accessible to every police agency and which determine how one can use them, when the technological system as a whole requires humans as little more than hands and eyes, maintenance workers and quality control inspectors, there are still anarchists who call for “taking over the means of production”. But the technological system that we know is itself part of the structures of domination. It was created to more efficiently control those exploited by capital. Like the state, like capital itself, this

of peasants in Europe—especially Britain—providing a quantity of indentured servants and criminals sentenced to hard labor and the development of the African slave-trade that tore people from their homes and forced them into servitude. The former was also largely based on the dispossession of the exploited classes—many of whom found themselves kidnapped and forced into labor on the ships.The industrial system imposed in these contexts did not so much have a basis in an assemblage of manufactured machines as in the method of work coordination in which the workers were the gears of the machine and if one failed to do his part it would put the entire structure of work at risk.

But there were specific aspects of this system that threatened it. The plantation system, by bringing together various dispossessed groups with differing knowledge and experiences, allowed interactions that could provide a basis for illegal association and shared revolt. Sailors who lived in slave-like conditions on the ships also provided a means of communication between different places creating a kind of internationalism of the dispossessed. The records of illegal associations and insurrections around the north Atlantic seaboard in the 1600’s an 1700’s involving all races of the dispossessed with little evidence of racism are inspiring, but it also forced capitalism to develop its techniques further. A combination of racial ideology and a division of labor was

used to form rifts between black slaves and the indentured servants of European ancestry. In addition, though capital would never be able to do without the transportation of goods and resources, for economic as well as social reasons it began to shift emphasis to the manufacturing of resources into goods for sale on a large scale.

The reliance on small-scale artisans to manufacture goods was dangerous to capital in several ways. Economically, it was slow and inefficient and did not place enough of the profit into the hands of the ruling class. But more significantly the relative independence of the artisans made them difficult to control. They determined their own hours, their own work speed and so on. Thus, the factory system that had already proven fairly efficient on ships and plantations was applied as well to the manufacturing of goods.

So the industrial system was not simply (or even primarily) developed because it was a more efficient way for manufacturing goods. Capitalists are not particularly interested in the manufacturing of goods as such. Rather they manufacture goods simply as a necessary part of the process of expanding capital, creating profit and maintaining their control over wealth and power. Thus, the factory system—this integration of techniques, machines, tools, people and resources that is technology as we know it—was developed as a means for controlling the most volatile part of the production process— the human worker. The factory is in fact set up like a huge machine with each part—including the human parts— integrally interconnected with each other part. Although the perfecting of this process took place over time as class struggle showed the weaknesses in the system, this central aim was inherent in industrial technology from the beginning, because it was the reason behind it. The Luddites recognized as much and this was the source of their struggle.

If we recognize that the technology developed under capitalism was developed precisely to maintain and increase the control of the capitalist ruling class over our lives, there is nothing surprising about the fact that those technical advances that weren't specific responses to class struggle at the work place have occurred most often in the area of military and policing techniques. Cybernetics and electronics provide means of gathering and storing information on levels never known before, allowing for far greater surveillance over an increasingly impoverished and potentially rebellious world population. They also allow the decentralization of power without any loss of control to the rulers—the control resides precisely in the technological systems developed. Of course, this stretching of the web of control over the entire social sphere also means that it is very fragile. Weak links are everywhere, and creative rebels find them. But the necessity for control that is as total as possible moves the rulers of this